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So proud of energy members

In February this year, Christina McAnea became general secretary of UNISON. Here is her message for all energy members

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I am delighted to make my first contribution to the UNISON energy members' magazine as your general secretary. It comes at a time when energy is very much in the news and at the front of many people's minds – not just in terms of rising energy bills, but also in terms of carbon emissions following the COP26 in Glasgow.

I am so very proud of the contribution energy members make to our union. I have always seen energy as very much a key public service and never more so than now. With costs rising and supplies uncertain, questions of ownership and strategic direction are very much to the fore.

As energy members you are contributing to the important debates taking place right now on these key issues. UNISON is leading the way in these debates, whether it be in our calls for: a national home energy efficiency programme; exploring the potential of hydrogen to replace methane gas in our gas grids; or in calling for public ownership of the energy retail sector. All of these are must-haves if consumers are to be protected and progress is to be made on decarbonisation efforts.

At the COP26 in Glasgow, we launched our key report, *Getting to net zero in UK public services: The road to decarbonisation* (see page 4), which details how an extra £140 billion is required in investment to ensure we decarbonise hospitals, schools and so on. This money is critical investment which will provide energy workers with jobs and programmes of activity for energy employers stretching well into the future. The more this investment is delayed, the more difficult the task becomes. Also, in the process, good energy jobs wither on the vine waiting for the green light. This is unacceptable.

We can wait no longer and I will be putting pressure on the government to put its money where its mouth is on addressing climate change and opening up a brighter future for all.

Enough of the hot air, let's see some action. Best wishes to you all and thank you for your continued support.

Christina McAnea

General secretary

Securing a better future



“We now need to secure a better future, not just for ourselves as energy workers but for all our citizens”

The past few years have been full of challenges for UNISON energy members. We have seen thousands of good jobs lost among the big six energy suppliers, as they themselves lost millions of customers to the numerous new energy start-up companies.

These smaller start-ups were committed to a business model which they knew was never sustainable. It has been a race to the bottom on price and has had massive consequences for consumers.

At UNISON, we have witnessed round after round of reorganisations to supposedly make work more efficient. Not only did these reorganisations not make work more efficient, they instead left the fewer remaining workers with more to do. This in turn has led to fatigue and workplace pressure, which only increases stress and illness. On top of all this, we have had Covid.

Suddenly energy workers found they were being valued for their work, at a time when some were being told they should be grateful to have a job.

It might prove to be a false dawn, but the recent problems with increasing energy prices, the supposed innovative start-ups going bust (something that was inevitable if

you sell energy consistently at a loss, nothing innovative about that!) and the need to invest in energy to enable net zero to be achieved, suggests more stable times lie ahead with the prospect of growth and new jobs.

The need to decarbonise all the UK's homes, businesses and public services will need billions of pounds of investment if it is to happen. Good energy jobs must be placed at the heart of that investment because without workers to do the work, decarbonisation will simply not happen, no matter how much we wish it so. I hope the penny is therefore starting to drop, not just with key employers, but importantly with Ofgem and the government too.

Much is still to play for, but I would like to think we have come through the worst. We now need to secure a better future, not just for ourselves as energy workers but for all our citizens. The future may well be in our hands.

Matt Lay

National officer for energy

Let public services lead the way

During COP26, UNISON launched a major new report in Glasgow, providing a roadmap to decarbonising public services

In November, with more than 100 international leaders attending COP26, UNISON laid out a detailed plan for achieving net zero in the UK's public sector.

At the union's Glasgow offices, general secretary Christina McAnea launched a major new environmental report, *Getting to net zero in UK public services: the road to decarbonisation*.

"We cannot allow the government's existing lack of climate ambition or commitment to provide decarbonisation funds to continue – or it will be too little and too late," she said. "Only by acting now can we put UK public services on the right path to a safe climate future."

Under UNISON plans, local authorities will be empowered to oversee and commission the decarbonisation and retrofitting of all public buildings, social and community housing. Key to UNISON's vision is adopting a social partnership approach, which will engage with public service workers and their unions to ensure the transition to net zero is just and fair.

"These measures will deliver a jobs' boost across the UK. In our report's modelling, the capital investment to green public services could create close to a quarter of a million jobs – directly and via supply chain – throughout the course of a 15-year programme," explained Ms McAnea.

"As well as improving the quality of life for service users, workers and the wider community, a number of the measures will also result in significant savings to public services' budgets, through lower energy bills, cheaper to run fleets, and procurement savings."

The task at hand

Public services as a whole (excluding transport) represent about 8% of the UK's direct greenhouse gas emissions – the NHS alone represents about 4%.

More than one third of local authorities (single and upper tier) have already committed themselves to decarbonise their local areas by or before 2030. And the NHS has declared that it will reach net zero by 2040, with an ambition to reach an 80% reduction by 2028 to 2032.

In terms of public service delivery, hospitals, schools and colleges, care homes and services, local government buildings, leisure centres, police and courts, social and community housing, water, transport and environment services will all need to decarbonise.

Substantial public funding

According to UNISON's report, which has been produced with research from the Public Services International Research Unit (PSIRU) at the University of Greenwich, central government needs to provide transparent public funding of over £140 billion up to 2035 to meet targets and decarbonise public services. So far, the government has committed just £8.2 billion towards such measures – a meagre 7% of what is needed.

The fear is that without adequate national funding, public services will only be able to achieve green outcomes in an ad hoc and piecemeal way. Also there is a risk that funds



for public services will be cut further to try and reach targets, harming our already underfunded and overstretched public services.

Findings

The report has three key findings:

- The government needs to start funding public service decarbonisation now. This requires an estimated capital investment of £140 billion up to 2035, where at least £122 billion should be provided by central government.
- The government must set up a separate and significant additional climate and decarbonisation budget, funded by Whitehall, otherwise public services will find it difficult to meet their statutory climate duties and net zero targets.
- The government must set up a social partnership and dialogue with trade unions in public service decarbonisation.
- Further recommendations include the establishment of a just transition agency or commission for public services, embedding a social partnership approach across the UK.

“Only by acting now can we put UK public services on the right path to a safe climate future.”



The challenge

Scientists say that we need to keep temperature rises within 1.5 degrees to prevent a climate catastrophe. If global temperatures rise above two degrees, then climate change will be unstoppable – leading to the destruction of coral reefs, increased flooding and drought and greater climate unpredictability.

At the energy seminar, national officer Matt Lay gave an overview of where the UK is at in terms of achieving its net zero goals. The UK was the first country to commit to getting to net zero by 2050. This means that there is a legal obligation for all laws and policies to reflect this goal. “All arms of the state have to put in policies to get us to zero by 2050,” said Matt.

The UK’s total carbon emissions are 1% of global emissions, compared to China’s, which are 28% and increasing, and India’s, at 7% and increasing.

“These figures give us a slightly false sense of achievement,” said Matt. “In the UK, we have stopped coal power stations, heavy industry and manufacturing – all of which are large producers of greenhouse gases. However we still consume these goods and have exported the problem to developing nations like China and India, which often don’t have the same environmental standards.

“The challenge for the global community moving forward is wealth sharing that doesn’t destroy the planet.”

The energy budget

Every five years, the government produces a carbon budget to measure progress in reducing emissions. So far, targets have been met, but it is unlikely that goals set in the next budget (2023-28) will be achieved. This is because most of the ‘easy’ reductions have been met, and the next round will require greater financial commitment and public investment.

“Our biggest producers of greenhouse gases are heat and power generation and transport,” said Matt. “These present huge challenges, but they can be addressed.”

Key energy facts

- ▶ At present, more than 80% of homes are heated by natural gas – a carbon fuel.
- ▶ Around 20% of energy produced is from nuclear power, but this will decrease in the coming years as power stations reach the end of their lives.
- ▶ Offshore wind power has the capacity to produce 45% of the UK’s electricity on a blustery day, but this energy cannot be easily stored.
- ▶ The UK needs to be able to store energy for peak demand times – in the winter when everyone puts the kettle on in the morning. One of the advantages of hydrogen gas is that it can be stored and transported.
- ▶ The grid is currently operating at full stretch and doesn’t have the capacity to provide power for the increasing number of electric vehicles being purchased.
- ▶ In 2020, carbon emissions dropped by a further 10% due to COVID.
- ▶ Fifty years ago, 50-60% of the UK’s energy came from coal. Today, its input is marginal.
- ▶ Solar technology is increasing, but does have limited capacity in winter.
- ▶ 8% of power comes from interconnectors in other countries.

Shocking ‘fire and hire’ at British Gas

In June 2020, Centrica announced plans to make significant changes to all of its 25,000 employees. If these changes were not accepted, the company was committed to firing them all – and then rehiring them under new terms and conditions.

In the middle of lockdown last year, when most employees were working from home, Centrica, which owns British Gas, announced it was going to follow a process called Section 188 (S188). This meant that the contracts of all the employees would be terminated on April 1st 2021 – if an agreement on new terms and conditions could not be reached. If members wanted to continue working for the company, they would have to sign a new contract under new terms and conditions.

Under a S188, workers effectively make themselves redundant if they don’t sign and are not then entitled to redundancy pay or Universal Credit for 26 weeks.

“It was a shocking meeting,” said Angela Greenhalgh, Chair of Energy Service Group. “Not only because Centrica came clean about what they wanted to renegotiate on terms and conditions, but because they also served notice on the collective arrangements that existed between the trade unions and the business.”

UNISON, as the trade union with the most staff members at Centrica, worked with the other three unions to come up with a revised counter plan that would provide the best outcome for members. The company proposals were complicated, as they affected workers in the field and in call centres differently. UNISON’s job was to ensure that staff members had a strong voice in the room and that



negotiations reflected this.

“I can’t praise the negotiating team enough for their hard work and dedication in delivering and supporting our members through this very traumatic process,” said the national secretary for business, community and environment (BET), Donna Rowe-Merriman.

Alongside negotiations, UNISON prepared the ground for an industrial action ballot and ran a strategic campaign which targeted other members, MPs and the public – calling for ‘hire and fire’ to be outlawed as a crude and unfair employment practice. This campaign put pressure on Centrica to revise proposals. This was crucial, as by this time,

“The talks were very high profile and complex. There was no one option that was right for everyone. There was no simple solution.”

negotiations had broken into the respective bargaining units. The office workforce and field workforces had different challenges, and this meant negotiators could focus on addressing these.

"The actions of Centrica at the outset made these negotiations very difficult, but we saw past these and worked hard to get a negotiated settlement that we believe was the best deal for our members," said Ms Greenhalgh.

- **86% of UNISON members voted to accept the improved company proposals**
- **13.5% UNISON members voted to reject the improved company proposals**
- **0.5% of ballot papers were invalid/spoilt**
- **Total turnout was 76%.**

It was a very stressful time for members. Although both UNISON and the GMB staff members accepted the deal by a similar margin, the GMB service engineers rejected the deal and chose to continue their dispute with Centrica. This resulted in protracted industrial action of some 40 plus days and the firing of some 400 engineers. In the end, the GMB voted to accept the package of changes.

"We fully understood the anger and frustration that was evident during the dispute," said Ms Greenhalgh. "But you only needed to see the company's collapsed share price and size of the pension deficit to understand the severity of Centrica's problems. Ultimately, we shared a responsibility for the thousands of members whose livelihoods depend on the continuation of British Gas."

What's the point in having a contract and negotiating terms and conditions, if employers can rip up contracts and bring in 'fire and hire' legislation at any time?

"It actually isn't the case that employers can 'fire and hire' at any time. We have the best in-house legal team of any trade union at UNISON, and the law is very clear on when this process can be used," said national officer Matt Lay.

"It should only be used in extreme circumstances. That means that if employers tried to bring in 'fire and hire' for a second time, they could find it very difficult. It is a very blunt instrument to use.

"An example of this is that, once Centrica had introduced the policy, we wanted them to pause the process, pending further negotiations. But this isn't possible with 'fire and hire' law. Once the process has been started, it cannot be withdrawn, halted or reintroduced.

"Fire and hire' has been around for many years. It's nothing new. It's just that several companies have considered reintroducing it since COVID. We know of several employers who backed down having seen the bad publicity Centrica received and how the company's reputation was rubbished as a result of their tactics.

"UNISON ran a really effective political campaign. We worked strategically: briefing MPs, emailing all our members to give them an easy way to register their disgust with their local MP; and supporting Gavin Newland's Private Members' Bill to prohibit employers dismissing employees and subsequently re-employing them for the purpose of diminishing terms and conditions.

"There are always good and not-so-good employers and UNISON has a very good reputation for working with companies. It's far more constructive for us to ask employers 'What do you want to achieve here?' and to work toward a negotiated settlement."

- **See page 8 for details of the settlement.**

The agreed deal with Centrica

Base Pay

Original offer

All pay to be based on market medium-aligned salaries following a three year pay freeze with no compensatory payment.

Revised offer

Pay to be based on market upper quartile following a three year pay freeze. Staff on or below the market medium rate will see their pay increase by CPI (cap at 2.5%) for three years. After three years, pay increases are to be negotiated whilst staff align over two years to the higher upper quartile rate. Those still above the upper quartile rate will have enduring protection, plus they will receive half the value of future negotiated increases.

Staff also received a compensatory lump sum payment of £1,000 at the beginning of 2021.

Working hours

Original offer

Working hours to increase without compensation.

Revised offer

No changes to staff working hours – fixed at 37 hours per week.

Working week

Original offer

Centrica proposed a move to a standard operational working week across the business of 6am-11pm, Monday to Sunday.

Revised offer

New operational working week for all employees of 7am-9pm, Monday to Sunday.

A memorandum of understanding for staff was agreed between the trade unions and the business. This ensures existing office staff are not suddenly subject to significant revisions to current working patterns. Any requirements for unsocial hour/bank holiday working will be through a 'volunteers first' approach.

Contracts

Original offer

The business was seeking to change the contracts of employment and effectively remove the right for trade unions to negotiate future changes.

Revised offer

The business agreed a revised position. For all level 7 and 8 staff, the terms agreed become contractual terms – subject to collective bargaining only with the trade unions.

Redundancy

Original offer

The business proposed the immediate removal of the enhanced GSSO contractual redundancy terms, to be replaced with a less generous, not defined and non-contractual package.

Revised position

Those entitled to contractual GSSO redundancy terms will see those terms protected for three years until April 2024. After that, and for those staff without contractual GSSO terms, a new contractual scheme will be used which is broadly equivalent to statutory terms x 2 with no upper limit.

Holiday pay

Original offer

Harmonise all leave at 25 days per annum plus eight bank holidays.

Revised Position

Harmonise leave on 25 days per annum plus bank holidays. However for those who are in receipt of more generous arrangements, there will be a gradual run down to 25 days over three years.

In addition, an improved profit share offer was negotiated. This ensures that 2% of adjusted operating profits are shared equally between all employees in the form of shares from April 2021.



Congratulations

Mary Onafalujo (left), who has been assistant national officer for energy for the last 13 years, has been promoted to national officer for water, environment and transport (WET). At the energy seminar, she was presented with a gift by Lindsay McNaught (centre) and Angela Greenhalgh of the energy executive to say thank you for all her hard work over so many years. "I want to say thank you for everything," said Ms Onafujo. "I shall miss everyone in energy so much."

Energy news

Hilary Benn MP addresses energy activists



He may have been diagnosed with COVID, but that didn't prevent local MP Hilary Benn giving a webinar presentation to members at their recent energy seminar in Leeds.

Reflecting the discussions of COP26, Hilary Benn endorsed UNISON's concerns that government investment to reduce

carbon emissions is "wholly inadequate".

"I am really impressed with the UNISON camp for responding extremely strongly to the challenges faced and we applaud your work in ensuring that any changes have to be fair.

"There is no point imposing a carbon tax on all households. It is grossly unjust to households on low incomes. The government's plan is wholly inadequate."

The Labour Party has committed £28 billion a year to tackle climate change if it is elected – around four times the money currently allocated by the government.

"The government doesn't have a plan and the clock is ticking. We're running out of time," warned Benn.

"Don't make the poorest pay the most"

"There is a real risk of creating two-tier system to net zero if advances are left to private industry," warned national officer Matt Lay. "Many of the current measures to address climate change will impact most on the least well-off." For example:

- ▶ Low-income households spend a much higher proportion of their income on fuel costs than wealthier ones. Fuel poverty is on the rise due to recent hikes in energy costs – and any carbon taxes on domestic fuels will make this worse
- ▶ The government has targeted 600,000 installations of heat pumps – as an alternative to gas boilers – by 2028. At present, only 30,000 a year are being installed. Heat pumps are expensive and cost around £10,000 to £15,000 – way beyond the budgets of majority of households.
- ▶ Energy saving improvements, such as solar panelling, improved insulation and replacement windows cost tens of thousands of pounds, but reduce bills substantially. Households living in poorer quality housing without these improvements will use more energy and have higher bills as a result.
- ▶ Taxes on petrol and diesel are high and likely to increase in the future to encourage drivers to go electric. However electric vehicles – starting at around £25,000 to £30,000 – are beyond the reach of most households. Unable to afford to replace their petrol car, low-income families will pay more in transport costs in real terms and disproportionately more of their overall income.



Award presented to National Grid

This year's Mike Jeram Award, which is awarded to the energy branch with the biggest increase in new members, was won by National Grid energy branch.

In addition, National Grid Energy has won two further awards from UNISON's West Midlands region for Outstanding Service to UNISON Members and Recruitment Innovation.

"These are hard won achievements in what has been a very difficult year for the energy industry. Congratulations to everyone involved," said national officer Matt Lay.

Pictured left to right: Matt Lay from UNISON, Sakinah Kachingwe, Isabelle Rich, Miriam Latona, Peter Read, Phebion Mudoti and Jason Rawley from National Grid Energy.

Disabled workers and COVID

In June 2020, UNISON carried out research to find out how COVID and homeworking had affected disabled members. At this time, lockdown had been partially eased, but most workers were still being advised to work from home.

Almost 5,000 members responded to the survey – and all of those were disabled workers with a mental or physical impairment lasting 12 months or more.

More than 50% of disabled workers had been able to work from home during COVID all the time – which was higher than national average. A further 15% could work from home for some of the time.

“Before COVID, only 5% of respondents had worked from home, so this was a huge change to working



practices,” said UNISON’s national officer for disability equality, Deidre Costigan. “We got some really positive feedback on home working.”

For the vast majority (nearly 73%) working from home was a positive experience and members said they felt “more or as productive”, as they:

- could take short breaks when necessary
- work a more flexible day
- felt less tired or had less pain due to commute
- had access to the bathroom (which reduced embarrassing or stressful moments for many members).

As a result of home working, there was actually a reduced need for sick leave as many disabled workers were able to manage their conditions better at home. This showed that people had been using sick leave to manage their disability.

One member who suffers from depression, said: “I feel safe (at home) and able to take breaks when I need to. I have less panic attacks, so am able to work for longer periods.”

However, 27% of workers felt less productive due to social isolation. Others had too many distractions at home, such as caring, or found it difficult to work due to a lack of a suitable workspace or IT.

Moving forward, Ms Costigan said that it is very important that disabled workers get to choose where they work best and that they are not ‘ghettoised’ to work from home or forced back to the workplace. “Every disabled worker’s needs are different and UNISON is here to ensure these needs are met.”

High hopes for hydrogen

Five weeks ago, the government announced its commitment to hydrogen as a future source of clean energy. It was the news the energy sector had been waiting for.

“All of the gas networks are working together on the government’s hydrogen agenda,” said Tom Notman, climate change scientist and director of Net Zero Delivery at Cadent.

“There’s a lot happening right now. But what we do know – looking to the future – is that there is no single solution. Different areas and different industries will require different solutions.”

The ultimate goal is for green hydrogen to reach capacity. It’s an ideal energy source as its by-product is water. To get there though, there needs to be a gradual energy transition.

Just as coal was replaced by natural gas – which produces half of the emissions that coal does – so blue hydrogen will be a transition energy to green hydrogen. Blue hydrogen produces less carbon than natural gas, but there are some emissions in its processing.

“Because of this, it’s important that we still keep training people to work in the gas industry,” continued Mr Notman. “People will still be needing to use natural gas for the next 50 or 60 years before the last supply will be finally disconnected. It’s very important

“What we do know – is that there is no single (energy) solution”

that transition is recognised as a long-term path.”

Over the next five years, exciting new multi-million pound hydrogen initiatives will be developed by the energy sector, including:

- **Hy4Heat** – researching and ensuring the safety of hydrogen as a home fuel source
- **H21** – multiple projects including a trial to convert Leeds to hydrogen
- **a new hydrogen skills academy** in 2024 to develop an education programme for new workers and those seeking to retrain in hydrogen
- **HyGrid** – which aims to demonstrate that the existing gas pipeline network is suitable and safe for hydrogen
- **H100** – a neighbourhood of 100 new homes all sourced by hydrogen
- **HyNet Homes** – a project to convert an existing village of around 5,000 homes to a net zero energy supply, which will mainly be hydrogen, backed up by electricity.



‘Let’s work together’

Tess Morris (39) has worked for British Gas for the last 19 years. During this time, her role’s expanded from call centre worker, to UNISON rep, to vice chair of Cymru Wales and South gas branch, to Labour Link officer and chair of the Energy Service Group Wales. And her roles keep growing.

Q: When did you first get involved with UNISON?

A: I’ve been a UNISON member since 2002 when I first joined British Gas. At one point, I became medically unwell and had to take time off to repair myself. To be fair, my employers were 100 per cent supportive. What I did notice though, was that while I received everything from my employer – from private care to additional time off – my colleagues did not necessarily get the same support. So when I saw a vacancy for a rep, I decided to apply.

Q: How did you become a rep?

A: It was 2014 and I’d just gone on maternity leave with my oldest daughter who was a few weeks old. There was a vacancy on UNISON’s stage one rep course, so with a baby pack in tow and a milk expressing machine, I carted myself off for 12 weeks of UNISON training. My colleagues on the course were lovely and it felt right and was what I wanted to do.

From the beginning, I was determined to work with management. I spent my time building a rapport with

them and we had many meetings. I was energetic and it served me well, because seven years on, I’m still representing members in the same department and we have a really good relationship.

Q: When did you get involved with the Labour Party?

A: When the role of Labour link officer for energy branch came up, I jumped at it. (Labour Link makes decisions about UNISON’s relationship with Labour and how the union votes in Labour elections and selections.)

With Labour in power in Wales, the politics are very different to England. Out of 30 Labour MSs (Welsh MPs), 17 are UNISON members. It means we can be influential and get to talk with ministers. Promoting energy has been key in these forums and meetings.

I’m was also involved with the Labour Party’s Welsh Party Democracy Review. As a UNISON delegate, I got to meet with ministers, officials – people from all sections of industry – about energy. I’ve also spoken at Labour Party Conference several times.

Q: Why do you do it?

A: A feeling of positiveness and I do it for my two daughters Arya (7) and Branwen (5).

I grew up in a really poor family. I didn’t get a higher education and I tinkered at college, but didn’t pass anything. I started work at 15, as I was young in my school year and I’ve never been unemployed. I’ve always worked.

I like helping people. UNISON reps are very different kinds of people. There’s not one type, just like there’s not one type of manager or one type of human being. You need many different varieties to make a success group.

Q: What are your strengths as a negotiator?

A: I’m very vocal and I’m very good at sitting down and having a conversation.

I couldn’t read or write at all until I was 10 and had to receive specialist education to learn. I’m also dyslexic. However, both of these have taught me to be always alert in negotiations. I have to listen, because I can’t catch up in other ways.

It’s helped me as a union rep because I’ll hear a conversation and am often able to realise when something, which sounds trivial, is really important. Often it’s not what people tell you, but what they don’t tell you that matters.

Q: How do you relax?

A: I am currently home working in my living room in Blaenrhondda, because of the pandemic. It’s a really small south Wales mining village and I’m very lucky, because there’s a waterfall outside my house and national walks all around.

I also like playing an online computer game called *World of Warcraft*. That’s how I met my husband (pictured above with their daughters) – otherwise how would I have met a Welshman in the middle of Leicester? In the game, you have a character and wear a head set and play with hundreds of people around the world. During lockdown, it was really good because it enabled me to have an outside world talking to my friends from Denmark, from Netherlands, from Sweden and the rest of the UK.

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